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ARCHITECTURE

THOROUGHLY MODERN VICTORIAN

A downtown Toronto semi keeps its genteel old façade but otherwise makes a transformational journey from 1886 to 2013, writes **John Bentley Mays** PAGE 2

'Through House' by Dubbeldam Architecture + Design BOB GUNDU

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AQUALINA COMING SOON
AT BAYSIDE TORONTO

Hines

TRIDEL
BUILT FOR LIFE

An 1886 house dons ultra-modern garb

From the street it still looks like a Second Empire semi, but step inside and you'll find a contemporary home of bright open spaces



JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
THE PERFECT HOUSE
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The romance of Toronto's late-Victorian home builders with the Second Empire style left the city with many a mansard roof, prominent dormer and picturesque front porch. While Rose-dale mansions were often crafted in this manner, the vogue found its most enduring expression in countless humbler row houses and semi-detached dwellings, some in what have recently become Hogtown's most desirable residential districts.

Harbord Village is one of them. For the architectural style spotter, this west side neighbourhood is a good place to hunt for examples of Toronto's Second Empire vernacular, the popular, mass-market version of the high fashion. The streetscapes there are lovely and we can hope they'll never be disrupted.

That said, the bewildered developers who gave us those attractive exteriors in the 19th century also believed that interior space was best diced up into small, dark bits. As a consequence the home buyer who decides to live in this part of town usually inherits a façade nobody would want to see demolished and an inside layout that no contemporary person could stand for more than a minute.

Such was the situation of a single doctor who bought a modest Second Empire semi in Harbord Village and then turned to the firm of Dubbeldam Architecture + Design for help in figuring out how to make it habitable. As I found during a visit a couple of weeks ago, the architects and designers at Dubbeldam gave their client good advice. They did right by the 1886 fabric of the house and right for the doctor by giving him a trim, hospitable interior.



The house opens out through glass walls at the back of the main floor. PHOTOS BY BOB GUNDU

You'd never know from the streetside façade and porch, for example, that the edifice is anything other than a staunch little two-storey Victorian. The tall front window has not been enlarged. Only the modern street numbers drop a hint that a thoroughly contemporary dwelling lies beyond the simple entrance.

The people at Dubbeldam have christened their project "Through

House," and the visitor understands why right after stepping over the threshold. All the elements of the interior – the long marble kitchen island near the front door, the sapele dining table that extends the island, the sweep of light tile flooring from front to rear, the cabinetry showcasing the owner's collection of East African masks – line up and carry the eye directly through the

space. The view opens out through glass walls at the back and side of the living-room area, and into the carefully landscaped deck garden at the same level as the main floor.

What's been intended here – in a venerably modernist spirit – are the union (insofar as it's practically possible) of interior and exterior and the creation of an outdoor environment that can be

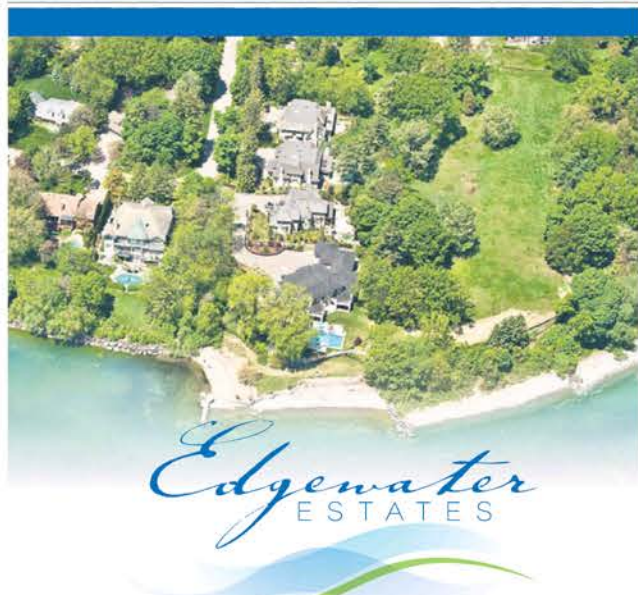
enjoyed throughout every season. To accomplish these ends, Dubbeldam wrapped the deck around two sides of the glassed-in living-room area and planted the deck's containers with a variety of green things that have both interesting three-dimensional properties and good foliage.

The result of these moves (especially the wrap-around decking) is a garden pavilion in the crowded heart of the city. The garden is not rigidly separated from living space. Rather, it surrounds the living-room ensemble, becoming an extension of it and an outdoor room in the proper sense of that phrase.

The living room, for its part, is made special by a lowering of the ceiling (to about eight feet from the nine-foot height in the dining room) and the framing of the space by a small and unusual fireplace. Fuelled by ethanol, the strip of flame burns within a wide-jawed white stone bracket that has been inserted into a tall stack of dark felt slabs. I have never before seen a fireplace surround made of cloth and you probably haven't either. But this one works well both as an expressive sculptural piece (by Toronto artist Kathryn Walter) and as a dressy, chic architectural accent in a scheme largely limited to large planes of greys and white.

The Dubbeldam office has done a good job with this renovation. It's intelligent, well-tailored and bright.

But it did leave me wondering (as I often wonder these days) when, if ever, the taste of clients and their architects is going to swing toward strong colour. As far as residential interiors are concerned, we have been living in a kind of ice age since the 1990s, where everything is white or grey or otherwise frigid. I am not saying Through House should be anything other than what it is, since it succeeds on its own terms. But I hope some day to see vivid hues make a comeback – dare I also ask for wallpaper? – in the places we call home.



Edgewater
ESTATES

INSIDE TODAY'S GLOBE

The Act of Killing

U.S. filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer talks about his disturbing documentary on the Indonesian mass killings of the 1960s.
Globe Film

